Missing friend spotted in woods

Queen_Quill
The police called off the search for Kate. She is the closest I've ever been to anyone. And she disappeared without even saying goodbye. Five years with no updates from police and their "search" comes to a close. I went on a night walk to clear my head. I fucking saw her. She was standing in the trees. Her head looked deflated and she had a sad expression. I ran after her, but she disappeared into the mist. This has to be a sign. She's out there in one form or another.

DEWALTMAN
hahahahaha

SuperbPudding
Nobody cares

Microbia
I'm so sorry to hear about your friend. What do you think this vision means? Are you sure it was her and it wasn't some random person that just so happened to look like her?

Queen_Quill
@Microbia It was her. I just know it. I've been looking at the same photos of her over and over. It had to be her. I have no idea what this apparition/person might mean.

ExpensiveDick
she probably realized she was stuck being around your fat ass and started a new life so she didn't have to breathe in your dorito breath all day long

Microbia
@Queen_Quill It sounds like you just need to get some rest and step away from this whole situation.
@ExpensiveDick Fuck off

Queen_Quill

@Microbia That's just the problem..I CAN'T sleep. When I finally get to sleep all I dream is about her. Her ghost has been haunting my dreams.

ExpensiveDick
WAAAAHH Muh friend… : ((oink oink oink oink!!!

theghouler
@ExpensiveDick throw yourself off the nearest skyscraper, retard
@Queen_Quill her spirit could be telling you a message that didn't get through

Microbia
@theghouler From what you've posted in the past you are a knowledgeable bloke, but you are jumping to some insane conclusions.

theghouler
@Microbia whats YOUR grand theory on this then? enlighten us

Microbia
@theghouler Hmm, let me think…She's:
1.Sleep deprived
2. Obsessed with this lost friend
3. Looking into the foggy woods at night
There's a clear explanation here.

VERAformer
All valid points. Curious to see where this goes.

theghouler
@Microbia why the fuck are you on a PARANORMAL/CONSPIRACY board? go back to r/atheism you faggot

Queen_Quill
Enough of this petty bullshit, what should I do??

theghouler

@microbia do you want the cast of GHOST ADVENTURES to assemble in the woods and hunt her down or something?

Microbia
@queen_quill I don't see how we can help in this situation.

Queen_Quill
I'll be at the east entrance of Liberty Park tomorrow at twilight. Whoever has the balls to show up can try to prove whatever theory you're proposing. I know I'm putting my fat ass in danger by making this public, but I'll do whatever it takes to get closure on Kate.
P.S. Pack a decent flashlight if you come.

DEWALTMAN
hahahahahahahahahaha

ExpensiveDick
everyone careful she doesn't roll over you

The pounding sensation in my head only grew worse the longer I stood by the dusty LIBERTY PARK sign. My hand gripped the can of mace hidden in the pouch of my sweatshirt. Images of strange hooded figures sneak attacking me invaded my mind. Maybe this wasn't such a great idea, after all. *Too late to turn back now,* I thought to myself.

I watched as a lanky figure walked toward me, his features at first shrouded in the dim light of the setting sun. With each awkwardly long stride he came closer to me. I sure as fuck hoped he was from the forum. The figure stepped into the bubble of light from the streetlamp and stopped when he was at arm's reach of me. His features were no longer left up to my imagination.

His entire appearance embodied apathy. His oversized, drooping clothes were riddled with stains. He didn't even attempt to cover up his unfortunate hairline. He looked like he hadn't shaved in weeks, judging by his patchy neck beard. I'd wager this was his first big venture out of his house in a while.

I couldn't help but notice his strange body type. His spindly arms and legs contrasted with the beer belly that you could easily see the outline of through his oversized shirt. Whoever this slob was, I had to trust he seriously wanted to help me out.

“Are you the person who saw the ghost?” the pasty man inquired.

“Y-yup.” My tone made it clear I was on edge, but this character didn’t seem to mind. I tried to work out which ONISM user this guy was. At this point it could be anyone.

He scratched at the facial hair that lined his neck and lower chin. “I imagined you looking different.”

I smirked and looked up and down my stubby, fat body. I knew what he wanted to say.

“You’re not *that* fat...”

It’s theghouler, I deduced.

“I expected you to be morbidly obese.” I began to open my mouth, then he added, “-and a guy.”

I reacted with a nervous laugh and instinctively crossed my arms to cover my bulging belly. I was mostly worried about being assaulted physically/sexually; I wasn’t prepared to deal with a situation this awkward.

The sound of the wind blowing whistling was like an alarm when there was a gap in conversation.

He broke the sound of branches rustling. “Queen Quill…” His face contorted as he visibly cringed. “That name sucks.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know…” I rolled my eyes. “Just call me Bri. It rolls off the tongue better.”

“Be careful how much you reveal about yourself or you’ll end up like Kate,” he said, continuing to smirk. It didn’t take long for him to sneak a joke in about my presumably dead friend.

“Right…and you are?” I already knew the answer but asked to be polite.

“I’m theghouler, but I usually go by Ghoul.”

I had never heard someone ask to be referred to by a username in the real world before. “Ah…Got it.”

Eventually we gave up on waiting for anyone else to show. “Well, it looks like it’s just us.” I said, trying not to sound too disappointed.

“It’s up to me to solve the mystery, eh?” he said in what I assumed was a joking tone. “What’s the plan, Q?”

“I’ll just show you where I saw the figure,” I explained.

“The *ghost*,” he corrected.

“We’ll see about that,” I sighed.

Ghoul followed closely behind me as we walked along the trail, our flashlights illuminating the dimly lit woods. A chill ran down my spine suddenly. This was the spot. I motioned at him to slow down and I came to a stop. I pointed ahead at the clearing.

"This is where I saw her," I said in a hushed tone.

Ghoul inspected the area closely with the aid of his light. There was a long silence only broken by his feet crunching through the dirt and leaves.

"No ghosts," he said bluntly. "No dead bodies, either."

I stared at him for a moment. "Well, what do you propose we do?"

He rubbed his hairy chin and looked deep in thought for a moment. "I might have better luck helping if I knew who I was looking for…and some basic information on her." He sounded serious for once.

"I can email you some pictures and-"

"Well, I'm here now." He started to sound impatient. "You have a bunch of pictures of her at home, right?"

I started to get nervous. Did I trust this guy to know where I lived? If he wanted to kill me he would have done it sooner, right?

I hesitated.

"If you don't want me to visit your place, I get it…but the sooner I know more about her the sooner you can get closure."

I sighed. "Fine. Fine…I'll take you to my place and I'll tell you more about her there."

We made the short walk to my cramped, messy apartment.

"...and this is us on skull rock."

Ghoul's bony face was illuminated by the light of the monitor as he stared closely at the picture. He no longer looked care-free and smug. His face went completely straight and serious, almost as if he was going full Detective Mode.

The photo was a crusty cellphone picture taken from a high angle by Kate depicting the two of us together. Kate was wearing one of her layered black denim outfits accented with spikes. It put my basic pedestrian clothes to shame — she was always more fashion-forward than I was. The two of us were sticking our tongues out, Kate's tongue revealed a piercing. My pale, freckled skin was the polar opposite of her clear dark complexion. I was a noticeably happier version of myself, before I became an even fatter shut-in.

"We'd go here all the time..." Memories of us shooting the shit on the vaguely skull-shaped boulder began to play in my head. "To hang out and smoke."

Ghoul twisted his gaze to me. “Weed?” His eyes grew wide.

“I…” I was at a loss for words. “Yes, weed.”

His expression returned to Detective Mode. “So this place has significance to the both of you?”

“Yeah.”

The memories of Skull Rock were still flooding in, as they often did. After a long pause as I stared at the photo, Ghoul broke the silence. “How did you meet?”

“It was at JCU-”

“That’s the University, up north, right?” he interrupted.

“-right.” I got back into the rhythm of my story. “So I was leaving some shitty boring film class. Some lecture about an old Soviet film or something…

“Kate happened to be taking the class, too. We made small talk about how much the class sucked. She showed me what she called ‘real cinema’ and the rest is history, I guess.” My mind trailed off for a moment.

“Did she have a lot of friends at JCU?”

I tried to remember. “Uuum…A few, but I was the person she spent the most time with.”

“So it wouldn’t be easy to find her other friends?”

“I don’t even remember their names, let alone if they still live around here.” I paused. “Plus, I think they graduated years ago and moved outta this dump.”

“A recluse *and* a minority? No wonder nobody gave a fuck about her disappearing.” Ghoul quipped with a shockingly light tone.

Grief overshadowed how offended I was at his blunt comment. I opened my mouth to speak but settled with grumbling.

He let out a sigh before shifting his eyes back to the picture. “Judging by her clothes she was either a Hot Topic type or into some edgy shit.”

“The latter…” I explained. “She was into ONISM and talked about horror movies all the time. No real life gore shit or anything that edgy.”

“What’s her username on ONISM?” he asked urgently.

“I completely forgot…” I felt like an idiot. How had I forgotten this crucial piece of information?

I opened up the existing ONISM tab on my PC, clicked on my username and dug through the hundreds of posts spanning over years. Eventually I figured it out.

“Wait, this is it!” I clicked on the username XXXYZ.

Ghoul stared at the screen. “I don’t recognize her username.”

I shook my head. “She mostly lurked. Didn’t really post much.”

We looked closely at her userpage. The bio read:

Fava beans and chianti

"Only 80 posts," he pointed out.

"I told you, she barely talked on here. She said she liked to read people's weird rambles before bed."

"Hmmm, let's read what she *did* post."

The results were pretty dull. Posts like:

ExpensiveDick
I once saw a man that looked exactly like Michael Jackson (white MJ) A ghost, perhaps?

XXXYZ
@ExpensiveDick Interesting stuff!

"These messages don't tell us anything,"

"Yeah, told ya so."

Ghoul got onto his feet and peaked through my closed curtains to see it was pitch black out. Time really blew by during our research. "Well, I have a jist of what she's like, plus a face."

"What do you wanna do now?" I asked.

"It's time to talk to her," he said as he threw his backpack on.

I gulped. "If you say so."

"Let's go back to where you saw her the other night."

I simply nodded and led the way back to Liberty Park.

The flickering light of the candles cast a dramatic yellow glow on our faces. We sat with our legs crossed.

"Careful you don't burn down the whole forest, dude," I said half-joking.

"Don't worry, I've done this plenty of times before…Now, to do this we must touch hands." This situation was only getting more awkward. "My hands are clean, I'm pretty sure."

I flashed him an awkward smile then nervously touched my palm to the back of his hand. His skin was surprisingly smooth. I expected his skin to be smothered in sweat and oil.

"You gotta be quiet unless you're speaking to the spirit," he instructed and I nodded in response. He cleared his throat then his voice suddenly took on a deep and dramatic boom."Will the spirit of Kate Davis make herself known?"

A particularly cold wind blasted past us. My hands began to tremble, but Ghoul gave me a reassuring look that said “It’s just the wind.”

I exhaled then timidly spoke out into the night. “Kate, are you there? I’ve missed you.”

I only heard the eerie sound of the wind whistling through the tree branches. Not a peep from any sorta spirits.

Ghoul returned with his dramatic baritone. “Please, show ANY sign at all to make yourself known.”

Another long pause with nothing out of the ordinary. Ghoul and I exchanged glances, wondering if she was here. Maybe me spotting her here the other night was a one time deal? We waited some time, occasionally speaking to my dead friend, only to be met with the ambience of the woods in reply.

Suddenly tree branches above us began to loudly crackle as the tops of our heads were pelted with twigs.

“The fuck?” Ghoul dropped the voice.

I looked around frantically.

“K-Kate?” I called out.

My eyes darted up to where twigs originated from in the silhouetted arms of the tree from above. I saw movement in the silhouette as a shadowy specter flew at me. I let out a shriek and covered my face with my forearms.

All I saw was thin air when I peaked past the sleeves of my sweatshirt. I looked around closer and the specter was nothing more than an owl with a massive wingspan. It glided silently up to a tree branch and hooted at me.

“Q! Q…It’s just an owl…No ghosts.” Ghoul tried to comfort me, but I could hear
the serious tone in his voice breaking,

I was too freaked out to even care that he's still calling me Q. I began to catch my breath and tried to slow my rapidly beating heart.

“Jesus fuck,” I swore under my breath.

Ghoul couldn’t help himself but to snort and laugh at my expense.

“We summoned an owl, at least,” he quipped.

I let out a sharp breath. “Real fuckin’ funny.”

He began to blow out the candles. “Better call it a night before we summon a bear.”

I started to think. “Do you think that owl symbolized something, maybe?”

Ghoul cocked an eyebrow at me. “I think the owl symbolized an owl.”

"You can't be for real. You were egging that one guy for being a skeptic. *You're* the one that conducted this seance. You gotta believe this means *something*!" I threw my hands up in the air.

"What did you expect? For her spirit to appear before us out in the open and say 'what's up?'"

I kicked at the dirt and shoved my chilly hands into my sweatshirt's pouch. "Well, this was a bust."

"It was fun while it lasted." Ghoul threw his backpack onto his back once again.

"Yeah, real fun…What do we do next?"

"I, for one, am going home. You can go smoke some weeds or whatever it is that you do."

I didn't want this to be the last time we talked. "Do you use Instant Messenger?"

He looked up at me and nodded silently.

I hesitated for a moment. "Wanna add me?"

"You seem pretty cool, sure. My username is the same as it is on ONSIM. Just shoot me a message whenever you get the chance."

I escorted him to the bus stop before returning to my place and collapsing into bed.

I slowly drifted out of consciousness and into a hazy vision of nothing. I enjoyed my time in this vague world up until I was once again face to face with Kate. She looked exactly as she did when I saw her in the forest, her head still resembling a slouching water balloon. Her dark skin now took on a bluish hue. She attempted to speak to me, but her words came out too muffled to make anything out. No matter how closely I put my ear to her mouth, it was indiscernible. In the real world my body tossed and turned until I inevitably awoke in a cold sweat.

The light of my phone flash banged my eyes, revealing that it was early morning. The image of Kate's ghoulish face made the idea of going back to sleep seem unappealing so I admitted defeat. My blurry vision soon became crisp as I slipped my thick-rimmed glasses on. I marched to my desk and my PC whirred awake. The first thing I did was shoot Ghoul a message.

6:32 **Queen_Quill**: Is this that lanky weirdo I met last night?

I knew it was too early for him to respond. So I returned to my pitiful daily routine:

-Shoveling junk food down my gullet.
-Flipping through the same photos of Kate.
-Picking up calls from my mom and listening to her beg me to go back to school.
-Checking ONISM.
-Watching movies – usually the ones Kate and I would watch together.

Suddenly, I heard the uncommon *DING* notifying me I received an instant message. I rushed to my computer to reply.

1:05 **theghouler**: no its the ghost of Katy OOOoooOOOO
1:05 **Queen_Quill**: rofl lol lmao hahahahahahahahaha
1:06 **Queen_Quill**: Do you wanna hang out again?
1:06 **Queen_Quill**: We could watch a movie or something.
1:07 **theghouler**: i have something else in mind…
1:08 **Queen_Quill**: What's that?
1:10 **theghouler**: dont wanna spoil the surprise…
1:10 **theghouler**: what are you doing right now?
1:12 **Queen_Quill**: Jack shit.
1:12 **theghouler**: wanna go on a secret adventure?
1:13 **Queen_Quill**: Sounds cool. Let's do it.
1:13 **theghouler**: ill be at your place in 30-ish minutes

I stood alone outside my apartment complex in anticipation of Ghoul's arrival. He arrived in exactly 30-ish minutes like he estimated.

"Sup?" he greeted.

"What's up?" I parroted.

He got right into it. "I don't imagine Kate will be showing her face around that park, so I thought of the next best thing: Skull Rock."

I scratched my chin. "It's a bit of a journey if you're going by bus…"

He flashed his crooked, yellow teeth behind a smirk. "Look, I'm unemployed and got nothing better to do! I don't mind riding a trashy bus for a while."

"Even when we *do* arrive, it's a bit of a hike. Just warning ya."

"That's fine by me."

I smiled back at him. "You got all the supplies you need for this grand adventure across Jersey?"

Ghoul nodded confidently and so we marched a few blocks to an empty bus stop that smelled vaguely of shit and piss. The tattered remains of a missing person poster with Katy's face on it barely clung onto the nearby telephone pole.

We got off Bus 13 right as the driver announced that it was the end of the line. In front of us was a winding gravel road piercing through a meadow and a wall of trees to the left.

"We'll be walking on that path for a while. Might want to refill on water before we make the trek. There won't be many signs of life up ahead," I instructed.

After filling our bottles with Jersey's finest tap water, we made the mile long trek.

"Why did you two like this spot? It's at the literal ends of the Earth."

"The campus isn't too far from here. Plus we liked that nobody ever came here, so we had it to ourselves."

Ghoul made a grunt that translated to "I see"

"I miss JCU" Bittersweet memories of the two of us dicking around campus played in my head. "I never got to finish my degree."

"Why not?"

"It'd be too painful to go back to that campus without Kate. I kept telling myself that next semester I'd summon the courage to go back…but five years have gone by and I just don't know anymore."

"Why are you doing this to yourself?"

I stopped walking and peered back at Ghoul who immediately stopped dead in his tracks, too. He'd never looked so serious before. "Huh?"

"I understand being a bit hung up on Kate, but…this is just a straight up obsession."

I got a bit perturbed. He hit the nail on the head. "I know…"

"None of this is healthy."

"I know!" I caught myself yelling and lowered my voice apologetically. "If I have closure on her I can move on from this whole ordeal."

"Do you think that's how it's gonna go? You'll see her spirit…Find her body or whatever and you'll return to school and never think of her ever again?"

My eyes dropped to my feet. "Probably not," I sighed. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I will never let this go…I wanna try to, at least."

We walked the rest of the mile in silence. Soon enough we saw the top of the boulder peaking over the horizon.

"There it is," I said, sorta glum.

We got closer and saw it in its full glory. The large lump of sediment leaned sturdily on the massive hill where a small featureless house loomed above. Skull Rock was about as tall as the two of us on each other's shoulders.

"It doesn't even look like a skull," he said, disappointed. He wasn't wrong.

"You gotta use your imagination. If you look at it from just the right angle, it *almost* looks like a skull." Seeing this monument to my nostalgia brought my spirits up a bit, if superficially.

I motioned for Ghoul to follow me. Muscle memory kicked in as I ascended the hill the rock leaned against. It wasn't hard when you knew the exact tree roots to grab onto. Soon enough I leaped onto the top of the skull. He struggled to keep up, so I pulled him up the rest of the way.

"Isn't it cool?" I commented on the view of the meadow and treetops down below. The trees were kinda decrepit, but still cool nonetheless.

"Ya know what…It *is* kinda cool," Ghoul replied.

Ghoul's eyes looked directly upward at the featureless house atop the hill. "Does anyone live there?"

I shook my head. "I never saw anyone come in or out of there in all the times we visited here."

"Weird." He returned his gaze forward.

We spent a while up there, not saying much. I ruminated on what he said about my obsession. He was definitely right.

"I'm gonna go back to school next semester," I promised.

"For real?" I surprised him.

I nodded. "This search needs to end already."

I thought during the long, comfortable pause. "Why did you wanna come here? To do a seance or something?"

"Nah…I just thought 'Skull Rock' sounded cool."

He grinned at me. I smiled back and we both looked at the sun setting across the tree-lined horizon.

I woke up the next morning ready to leave Kate in the past. I left a final update on my ONISM thread.

Queen_Quill

I'm putting Kate's spirit to rest. She's gone and there's nothing I can do about it. Thank you to everyone who showed me support and helped me out. Special thanks to the shitposters, you guys gave me a good laugh.

I didn't bother checking the replies before I shut down my PC. There was a loud buzz like a horsefly coming from my cellphone. My mom was calling. I picked up the phone and let her know the good news.

Seasons passed. Kate slowly got pushed into the back of my mind, but her spirit never ceased to loom over me or my dreams.

7:52 **theghouler**: how was the first day back at uni?
7:55 **Queen_Quill**: Not so bad. I felt ancient compared to all the other students, though lol
7:56 **theghouler**: you should start an ONISM club or something
7:57 **Queen_Quill**: You joke but I was seriously considering that.
7:58 **theghouler**: gotta go, you still down to watch hang at my place tonight?
7:59 **Queen_Quill**: Hell yeah.

He logged off. I stared at my screen for a moment. I decided to check the old ONISM thread about Kate for the hell of it. I laughed at the replies, but one stuck out to me:

DEWALTMAN
hahahahaha

This username unearthed a connection I had never considered. It was the same person who kept replying to Kate's ONISM posts. I just assumed it was some shitposter or a friend of hers. I absentmindedly clicked on his username. And looked at some of his posts.

XXXYZ
@VERAformer if you like slowburn movies like that then you gotta check out Lake Mungo

DEWALTMAN
@XXXYZ glad to see your still alive

The only user he'd reply to was her. No matter what she said, he kept cloying for her attention.

XXXYZ
@Microbia Very cool

DEWALTMAN
@XXXYZ youre too shy

She never even replied to these creepy messages once. He kept persistently sending them, anyway. There was a 5 year gap in his posts then he suddenly left the "hahahaha" messages replying to my thread right as it was posted.

I looked at each post he ever made. There was only one that wasn't a reply to Kate or me.

DEWALTMAN
Nobody understands poor old DEWALTMAN : (My co-workers never wanna talk to me. My mom never wants to talk to me and calls me annoying and weird. I don't even have any friends. I like to go into the city and people watch, but when I do strangers make weird faces at me. My favorite place to do this was at the college campus. The mean security guard banned me from the premises, though. So now I just look out my window with the blinds shut and watch people from here. I live on a hill above a trail where I see hikers sometimes. When I'm feeling really naughty I like to eavesdrop on people's conversations, but Mom says it's rude (I do it anyway when she's not around). I wish people understood me.

"What the fuck…?" I swore at my monitor.

I thought my heart was gonna burst. I had to do something. I frantically took screenshots of all the posts with Kate and DEWALTMAN and printed them out. I grabbed the pile of evidence and slipped my boots on and stormed outside. Time was of the essence.

Across from me sat the officer in JCPD uniform that I heard on the other end of the line whenever I'd call about Kate countless times.

"Do you want a glass of water or-?" He looked rather concerned.

I shook my head in response. “I want you to look at these.” I slammed the now partially crumpled stack of printer paper down on his desk.

He let out a sigh. “Bri…You know we closed this case-”

“JUST…” I tried to gather my composer. “Just…look at the posts.”

He looked me in the eye for a moment before looking down at the pile of evidence and flipped through it like someone speed reading a book for English class. He shook his head at the pages.

“This internet stuff isn’t worth anything in an ongoing investigation…” Then he emphasized. “Let alone a *closed* investigation.”

“Then fucking REOPEN it!” I ran my fingers through my frizzled ginger hair.

He read the page with my ONISM post on it and pointed to the username Queen_Quill. “This you?”

I forgot I had written about seeing her ghost. “Yes, that’s me.”

He shook his head. “Look kid, we already told you on the phone. There’s nothing we can do about this. We’re up to our necks in other cases.” He put the pages in my hands and any sort of hope I had was murdered.

“Can’t you at least keep this as evidence…?”

The officer simply shook his head once again. I didn’t resist when he escorted me out of the building.

“You might want to look into therapy,” He suggested on my way out. It was like one final insult before I was out the door.

I stood outside the police station, grasping the evidence that Kate was murdered.

10:29 **Queen_Quill**: DEWALT MAN KILLED KATE
10:30 **theghouler**: are you fucking serious?

I briefed him on what I had come across on ONISM and my journey to the police station.

10:45 **Queen_Quill**: He was stalking her and he killed her
10:45 **theghouler**: If that’s the case, why didn’t he kill you too?
10:46 **Queen_Quill**: He must not give a shit about me
10:46 **Queen_Quill**: He lives in that house above Skull Rock. Her body has to be there. I have to get evidence there.
10:46 **theghouler**: Slow the fuck down. You’re jumping to conclusions based on posts on a site where half the people are shitposters.

10:47 **Queen_Quill**: The police don't fucking care, Kate's family doesn't wanna hear from me. Not even fucking ONISM cares. What other option do I have?
10:48 **theghouler**: I can't say for sure if Dewaltman did or didn't kill her. Going in the middle of nowhere by yourself to investigate is a bad idea either way.
10:48 **Queen_Quill**: I have to do this
10:49 **theghouler**: Bri you said you'd move on from all this bullshit
10:50 **Queen_Quill**: I NEED FUCKING CLOSURE
10:51 **theghouler**: You are gonna get yourself killed you fucking idiot.
10:52 **Queen_Quill**: This is the only way.
10:52 **theghouler**: I swear to God Bri.

My body was in a trance during the entire trip to Skull Rock. The logical side of me was screaming for me to turn around but the emotional side needed this closure more than anything else. I didn't actually give a shit about finishing school or getting a nice job or moving onto "bigger and better things," that had all been me doing mental gymnastics to convince myself it *was* what I wanted. Kate was the most important thing to me.

Thunder roared and rain poured down on me, soaking through my clothes. The world itself was demanding for me to turn back, but I trudged forward up the mud-soaked hill. I was closer than I had ever been to this place. It was painted stark white and every single window had the blinds shut tightly, blocking anyone from looking in from the outside. I stood at the entrance to the home of Kate's killer – he hadn't even bothered to lock it. He was challenging me to enter.

I pulled out my flashlight and clicked it on, swaying the light around to see if there was any damning evidence. I advanced forward, adrenaline pumped through every fiber of my body. I paid no attention to the trail of muddy bootprints I was leaving behind with each step.

My light didn't reveal a thing in the hallway other than a totally blank white, plaster wall that stretched on and on into the belly of the beast. The entire house was dead silent aside from the echoing of my clomping footsteps and the pitter patter of the water dripping off my clothes onto the hardwood floor. The clomping stopped when I reached a doorway leading into whatever Hell awaited me. The door was ajar, daring me to enter. A mysterious stench wafted from this corner of the house.

I silently swallowed a mouthful of saliva and scouted out what this room contained. The small circle of light shifted from the empty wood floor up to the wall. I felt terror fill every cell of my body. There were what looked to be hundreds, maybe

thousands of overlapping pictures stuck to the wall with Scotch tape. Every single one of Kate. Some from a high angle sitting on Skull Rock. Some of her candidly walking around campus. Some were clearly taken from outside her bedroom. You couldn't make out a centimeter of the white plaster underneath.

My hand began to tremble. Every molecule in my body was screaming at me to get the fuck out, but I came too far to not get SOMETHING to make all this risk worth it. With great hesitation I shifted the light to reveal what was on the floor. The first thing my light spotted was a futon laid on the ground with a human-sized lump bulging from the comforter.

GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE LEAVE GET OUT, my mind screamed at me.

Despite it all, I inched closer. There I stood at the foot of the bed of her killer. There was only one second of hesitation before I used the top of my muddy boot to slowly uncover whatever laid underneath. I didn't know the human heart could beat this fast. Slowly but surely the blanket shifted and I could see the tip of something poking out from under the covers. Could it be DEWALTMAN taking a nap? When I saw black hair jutting out of the edge of the edge of the comforter, the truth of the situation was clear.

I violently gripped the edge of the blanket and whipped it off the bed onto the other side of the room. My light revealed it to be a partially decomposed corpse curled up on the bed in a spooning position. The body had its back turned to me, as if it was trying to hide away from me to spare me any further trauma. My initial reaction was to turn away and cover my eyes. I gathered all the courage I had in me and opened them back up and inspected the corpse closer. It was dressed up in the same black denim outfit I saw Kate wear countless times. There was a cavernous hole smashed in the back of the skull that he had crudely covered up with a bandage. The hair was clearly being cut regularly to look exactly like Kate's. The fabric under the body had deep, dark stains splotched around it. I leaned in over the corpse's shoulder to get a look at the front of its head. What I saw wasn't the face that's been haunting my nightmares. Even my own mind couldn't conjure a face as sad and terrible as what I saw hiding away from me on that bed. Her leathery, bloated head was plastered with a permanent expression of despair. It was as if she had been conscious these last five years and knew she was trapped in here with this man the rest of time. I could only stand to stare at her mummified face long enough to confirm my worst fear. It was Kate.

My body instinctively jerked back and I fell on my ass. I gripped my face with all my strength, wanting to tear my eyes out more than anything else in the world. I tasted bile rise up to the back of my throat.

TURN AROUND! TURN AROUND!

The last thing I heard was his labored breath directly behind me. I began to snap my head back, but all I caught was the silhouette of a hulking figure swinging his bludgeoning weapon down on me. For one split second I felt a pounding sensation on the back of my head before everything went black.